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CIA link with the murder of British reporter

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DAVID HOLDEN, the *Sunday Times's* murdered chief foreign correspondent, was almost certainly a victim of the passions that surrounded the birth of President Sadat's peace initiative with Israel.

Two years after he was found shot through the back in a Cairo suburb, that remains the most positive thing that can be said about a killing that has produced far more questions than answers.

Now the newspaper has raised the spectre that the American Central Intelligence Agency may be withholding information about its reporter. Last week its lawyers went into the Federal Court in Manhattan and started an action against the Agency under the Freedom of Information Act.

For public consumption *Times Newspapers* is saying that it has 'no reason to think that the CIA has information, but wants to make certain.' However, *Sunday Times* reporters who have spent months working on the story of Holden's death are convinced that the Agency knows more about the matter than it is prepared to admit.

They are particularly interested in information about two of Holden's contemporaries during the two years he spent in the United States between 1951 and 1953: doing post-graduate research into the sociology of small mid-Western communities at the North Western University.

One was an Indian called Surinder Suri. The other was Dr Leo Silberman, a Briton, who was Jewish and has since died of natural causes.

The reporters made their first application to the CIA for information in August 1978, eight months after the murder

It was only when the Agency failed to respond to that request, and to another made three months later and asking them to expedite the matter, that their curiosity was aroused.

A file on the Holden investigation is missing from the *Sunday Times's* editorial offices in Grays Inn Road, London. There is apparently some doubt about whether the file has been stolen, lost or accidentally destroyed. Nevertheless, its loss has added more mystery to the situation.

David Holden was 53 years old when he died at the height of a distinguished career as a journalist, author and broadcaster. He had had published two scholarly books, a modern history of Greece and a work on Arabia, and was writing a third.

He was much respected as an authority on Third World affairs, particularly in the Middle East, and had an arrangement with the *Sunday Times*, which he joined in 1965, whereby he usually worked for it for six months of the year and wrote his books or did broadcasting work the rest of the time.

At the end of November 1977 Holden returned to the Middle East to report on the reaction in Arab capitals to President Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem. As he wrote in his last article for the *Sunday Times*, published on 4 December, he had spent the week shuttling between Damascus and Amman, talking to many ordinary Syrians, Jordanians and Palestinians.

In Syria he also saw the Minister of Information, Iskander Ahmed, and in Jordan he interviewed King Hussein.

Having filed his report from Amman, he crossed the Allenby Bridge into the Israeli-occupied West Bank and spent the weekend at the American Colony Hotel in east Jerusalem.

By Tuesday, 6 December, he was back in Amman, from where he boarded Royal Jordanian Airlines flight 503 to Cairo.

There seems little doubt that his killers picked him up at the airport, probably in a battered, locally made white Fiat 128 which had been stolen from central Cairo the night before.

His luggage and typewriter were later found in the boot of this car, but his tape recorder, tape cassettes, cameras, exposed film and some of his papers were missing. Certainly, he never reached his hotel. Nor is there any record of his having taken a taxi.

From the white Fiat Holden was transferred to another stolen Fiat 128, this one a newer model, the property of the Planning Director of the Nile Agricultural Export Company. Two front seat headrests were transferred to the newer vehicle with him.

It appears that Holden was crammed in between the driver and somebody else in the front seats. A third person was sitting in the back.

It was this person who fired a shot under Holden's left shoulder blade that went through his heart. An ejected case from a 9 mm automatic pistol was found under the driving seat when the car was discovered in the Nile Delta town of Tanta, 80 miles north of the capital.

The Egyptian police maintained that bloodstains between the two front seats

matched Holden's blood group.

Holden enjoyed a reputation as a clever and hard-working journalist, nothing else. Yet the manner of his death has had the rumour mills of Fleet Street and the Middle East grinding out more spy plots than a Le Carré omnibus.

At first it seemed that the crime was going to be solved very quickly. Within days of his body being found the Egyptian police had picked up three Palestinians, two men and a woman.

The woman was the owner of the white Fiat in which the luggage had been found. A friend of hers had reported the car stolen on the morning of 6 December, as Holden was coming back over the Allenby Bridge.

But after keeping them in custody for 10 days the murder squad released them.

The police declared later that the killing had been so professionally carried out—the other Fiat had been stolen on the day Holden first started making arrangements to come to the Middle East—that they believe it could only be the work of an intelligence agency.

Yet the theory that an extremist Palestinian faction was responsible for the journalist's death is still not entirely implausible. In his last article Holden wrote that President Assad of Syria was anxious to restore 'the vital axis between Cairo and Damascus.'

As things turned out, he was wrong. Nevertheless, at the time there was, behind the public rhetoric, considerable prevarication in Arab capitals about the Sadat initiative.

The notion that Assad and Hussein, the leaders of the two other front line States, were about to join Sadat in a 'sell-out' would have put people on the alert for any secret conciliatory messages